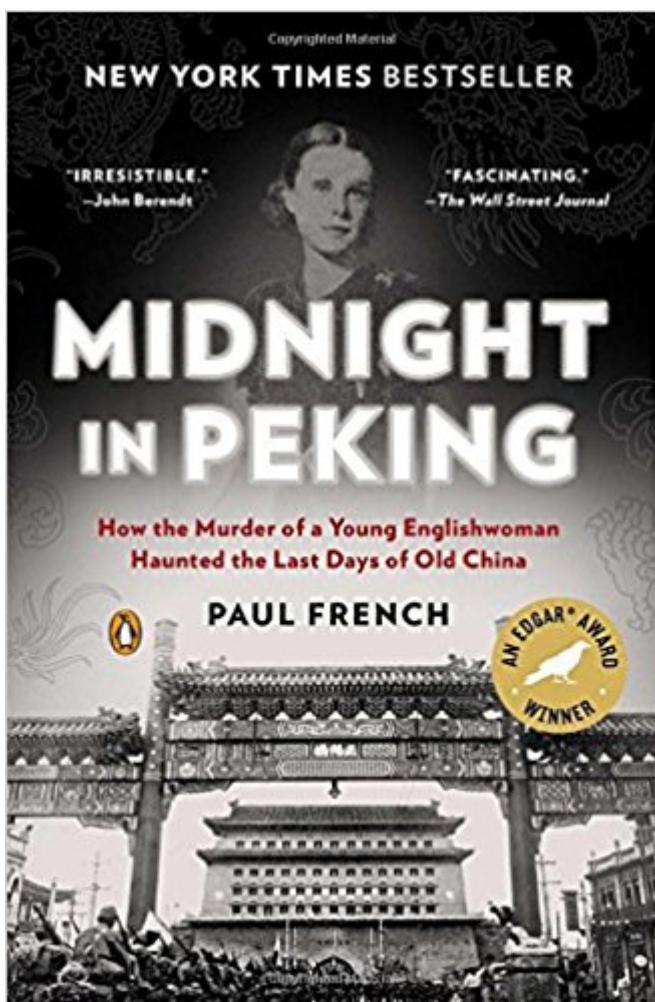


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Midnight In Peking: How The Murder Of A Young Englishwoman Haunted The Last Days Of Old China



Synopsis

Winner of the both the Edgar Award for Best Fact Crime and the CWA Non-Fiction DaggerChronicling an incredible unsolved murder, *Midnight in Peking* captures the aftermath of the brutal killing of a British schoolgirl in January 1937. The mutilated body of Pamela Werner was found at the base of the Fox Tower, which, according to local superstition, is home to the maliciously seductive fox spirits. As British detective Dennis and Chinese detective Han investigate, the mystery only deepens and, in a city on the verge of invasion, rumor and superstition run rampant. Based on seven years of research by historian and China expert Paul French, this true-crime thriller presents readers with a rare and unique portrait of the last days of colonial Peking.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Pamela Werner was a high-spirited, independent young woman living with her father in Peking, China during the late 1930s. On a cold January night in 1937, Pamela was found brutally murdered at the foot of one of Peking's well-known landmarks - the Fox Tower. Pre-world war II Peking was a stressful place to live. China was in the midst of a civil war and the Japanese had invaded and were waiting for the opportunity to capture the city. Nerves were frayed. A cloud of doom hung over the streets. Even the well-protected foreign nationals were feeling the shifting of events. But the brutal murder of Pamela Werner kicked the anxieties of the city up several notches. Both the Chinese and foreign nationals fearfully wondered who could have butchered this innocent young girl. Paul French's *Midnight In Peking* is a masterfully woven non-fiction murder mystery peopled with smug British diplomats, harried Scotland Yard detectives, Chinese police officers with mysterious

agendas, an American dentist with degraded, lustful designs, and a beautiful young woman who isn't all that she seems. French has done his research, and his findings from the papers of Pamela's father are most intriguing. Even after the British dropped the case, Werner doggedly pursued his daughter's murderer asking help from the Chinese and even the occupying Japanese. His determination to find his daughter's killer is inspiring. *Midnight In Peking* reads like a true-to-life Agatha Christie with a lot more carnality. Peking, like most places, had a dark side that could lure a naïf young woman to her death, and French takes us there. This is no stuffy history text.

This is a fascinating time to study and the sense of place is excellent. The facts of the true story, and the author's hypotheses, also ring as authentic. One difficulty I had is that it was a chore trying to connect the atmospherics to what was happening where in China with regard to the Japanese, the Kuomintang, and the survivors of the Long March. I realize the author had to make some decision about how much background on larger events to include, and made a decision to include only what was necessary to his core text, but the overall situation could have used a few more paragraphs every 6 months or so. The facts of the mystery, the investigations and the details of its solution unfortunately suffer from the tyranny of this being a true story -- of having to hew to the known facts as we can discover them. From my perspective, the devotion to the limited factual material interferes with the coherence and balance a work of fiction on the same subject very likely would have had. We are left at the end with too many unasked obvious questions, and with the peculiar lack of persistence or intelligence in the investigative process. (Not the author's; the characters'.) This work might serve as a ringing castigation of the forces that were in charge, if any of them were in office and in charge somewhere today, but the author's refusal to "connect the dots" and to only raise unanswered questions in some elements of the story, but to speculate freely -- and probably astutely -- in other parts, leaves a reader with a measure of frustration at the end.

This is a true crime novel about the upper middle class adopted daughter, Pamela Werner, of a ranking English Civil servant, Edward Theodore Chalmers Werner, who was found brutally murdered [organs removed from the body and all her ribs broken outward] on January 8, 1937 about a month before her 20th birthday. Supernatural spirits were first thought to have done it as the body was found in the shadow of what was colloquially called the Fox Tower, thought to be inhabited by the spirits of foxes; it was actually a guard tower to the walled enclave of the foreign legations of Peking. The body was found in an area just outside of the walled city called the badlands and would be similar to what we would call the slums. The first two thirds of the book involves telling

the story of both the Chinese head police detective involved in trying to solve this case, a Colonel Han Shik-cheng and his British counterpart, one Detective Chief Inspection, Richard Harry Dennis, especially assigned to assist Colonel Han as the murder involved a relative of ex-British Consul although the body was obviously found on Chinese soil. Along the way to the solution of the riddle surrounding the murder we are introduced to a real cast of characters as drunken cops, various thugs, several prostitution rings - the assorted pimps and madams, a shady but discrete nudist colony catering to those with eclectic sexual tastes, various warlords each trying to protect their respective turf, and the two main detectives who are hampered in their quest for answers, but for widely divergent reasons.

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